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The Christian News-Letter

Edited by
J. H. OLDHAM

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DEAR MEMBER,

We have been occupied in recent News-Letters with some of the large movements that are influencing the life of our time. It may be a good thing to look again at the concrete realities of the situation to which the work of the Church has to be directed. A good many letters reach us, giving descriptions of the facts as the writers see them. Here are two samples. I am sure that the writers are giving a true account of the facts within the range of their observation. What no one can say in regard to such reports is the percentage to which they apply, i.e. whether they apply to 10, 25, 50 or 75 per cent of the class in question.

The first letter is from a R.A.F. chaplain, whose work has given him contacts with many thousands of men ; the second from a young officer.

(1) " Few Christians can remain complacent when they observe the relatively insignificant response shown by the rank and file when confronted by the average presentation of the Christian faith. No amount of wishful thinking can alter this fact, and the sooner we recognize it the nearer we shall be to a solution.

" With a very large number of men (predominantly younger) the most alarming symptom is a lack of interest in anything of a deeper nature. There seems to be a mental inertia which shows itself when faced with claims other than religious. There is regard for the more superficial attractions in recreation, but that which calls for real thought and application is often not popular. Sometimes there is a listlessness with a corresponding lack of a sense of responsibility. Most pathetic of all is the frequently apparent absence of an ideal, which leads to selfishness and thoughtlessness as well as hopelessness. Coupled to—indeed, consequent upon—this is the almost innate idea about the remoteness of the ' Supreme Being,' the utter irrelevance of Christianity, and incredible vagueness about faith. It is from this stratum that the various ideologies of our day recruit so many of their ' mass ' numbers. Crowd psychology helps in sweeping them along on a popular tide, as we have seen in Europe."

(2) " Our one object at the moment is thinking out better ways for killing the most people with the fewest shells, and it is after all the matter in hand, as one would say. Most soldiers want to go back after the war, back to the life they used to lead. They want to resume it as though what they had been through were but a bad dream. They care not who rules them, or by what system they are governed, so long as they have their job, their home, and all they had before they left home. No one, as far as I can gather, is concerning himself about a better state of affairs or a worse one after the war. Army life does not encourage political thought, but these men were apathetic before the war. I may paint a gloomy picture, and I hope it's only a picture of one small section of life, but I fear that soldiery doesn't realize that the real job doesn't start until this war is won."

To these accounts may be added an analysis of the religious situation by a man who is in a position to see it from a good many different angles :

" Almost every statement about our spiritual condition, made on evidence, can be countered by a direct negative, also on evidence. On the one side, you can point to the way in which the war has clarified moral vision and introduced discipline and the spirit of mutual service, to the wide-spread interest in religion of all kinds, and to the amount of discussion of serious issues which is taking place both in the Forces and elsewhere, and the mood of determination, in some quarters, that what happened in 1918 shall not happen at the end of this war. On the other side is the deep-seated cynicism and suspicion, especially noticeable among the young, and traceable to the bitter disillusion after the last war.

" It is a complex situation which might go in almost any direction, but it is not likely to remain in equilibrium on its present plane. What happens will be determined to a large extent by factors at present very obscure, e.g. by the degree in which religion is able to interpret this world-catastrophe adequately to men, or by the effect on men's minds of a victory based almost entirely on the possession of overwhelming force—and force derived from the application of scientific knowledge rather than religious faith.

" This immense catastrophe demands interpretation. If it is not interpreted in a spiritual sense it will be interpreted materialistically. But the Churches have been hesitant in interpreting it directly and simply (as, e.g. a Crusade). Moreover, the people are more fully conscious than they were before of the great gulf fixed between what we are forced to do in total war and what they understand Christianity to stand for ; they are not, as yet, disinclined towards *religion*, but they cannot see what *Christianity* has to do with this crucial and determinative experience of total war. Thus, the truer the Churches are to their best instincts, the more respect they enjoy for being at least partially loyal to their faith ; but, at the same time, the more irrelevant that faith must appear to a people fighting with hideous weapons for its life. (Most people, in their heart of hearts, regard Christianity as a pacifist religion, or at least as an unwar-like one ; and our attempts to square the circle do not impress.) "

THE SUPPLEMENT

We have been able in the past to give you at Christmas time a Supplement of a distinctive character. We tried again this year, but two attempts met with disappointment—a not uncommon experience under war conditions. It was then too late to try further, so I was left with no choice but to do my best to write you a Christmas letter.

Yours sincerely,

J. H. Oldham

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